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THE F-14 DECISION
AND THE POLICY MAKING PROCESS

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Report Documentation Page

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Does America need more F-14 Navy fighter jets? After five months of debate in Congress, the question may finally be answered by a conference committee of the House and Senate members. But the future of the aircraft, assembled on Long Island by Grumman Corporation, is likely to be decided more by old-fashioned politics than by the loftier issue of national defense needs.

The hottest issue in the just-concluded fiscal 1990 defense authorization conference was whether to cancel the Navy's Long Island-produced F-14D -- nicknamed Tomcat. Conferencees settled on a final buy of 18 jets for \$1.6 billion -- with the proviso that no more of the Grumman Corporation fighters would ever, ever, ever be built. "In my roughly 20 years involved in this, I've never seen such forceful, if not ruthless, lobbying," John W. Warner of Virginia, ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, griped to reporters after the conference. "We've nicknamed the termination clause 'the poison pill,' and hope it sticks."

How did we arrive at a final buy of 18 new jets when the House Appropriation Committee favored 12 and the Senate favored cancelling the program all together? Representative John M. Spratt (D-S.C.) stated, "Well, you just don't understand how we do math around here!" The decision to purchase new F-14Ds offers an interesting and somewhat representative insight into our bureaucratic process. Let's

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start with the background and current issues surrounding the procurement of the F-14D and then take a look at the major players -- the Department of Defense, Grumman Corporation, and the Long Island Congressional Delegation -- and how each affected the outcome of the F-14D decision.

Current Issues

The current issues before the Congress include the Navy's inventory requirements for the F-14, the cost-effectiveness of remanufacturing F-14As as D versions versus procuring new F-14Ds, and the effect that ending procurement of new F-14s may have on the defense industrial base and competition in Navy fighter aircraft.

Supporters of the program argue that: 1) the Navy needs to continue buying new F-14Ds to maintain inventories 2) the F-14 force can be modernized more cost-effectively by buying new F-14Ds 3) procurement of these aircraft will ensure Grumman's survival as a major competitor in the production of Navy fighters.

Critics of the program argue that: 1) new production of F-14Ds is too expensive 2) existing F-14As can be re-engined and upgraded at less annual costs 3) and the Navy's F/A-18 fighter/attack planes can perform many F-14 missions while a carrier version of the Air Force's Advanced Tactical Fighter (ATF) is being developed to replace the F-14.

Department of Defense

What began as a quiet lobbying effort by the Grumman Corporation and Congressmen from Long Island to save the F-14 fighter has erupted into a test of wills with Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, according to the New York Times. Secretary Cheney wants to stop producing the F-14, to help cut the military budget. Grumman and the Congressmen want to continue making the plane because, they say it is vital to the company's survival and to 5,700 jobs on Long Island.

Secretary of Defense Cheney explained that his decision not to continue buying new F-14Ds was based only on budgetary constraints and relative costs and not doubts about the aircraft's capability. Secretary Cheney told the House Armed Services Committee that producing new F-14Ds at a rate of 12 per year would cost "well over \$50 million a piece," whereas "By keeping the remanufacturing operation going ... to the point where we will be remanufacturing 60 aircraft a year," each such aircraft would cost "about half of what a new one does."

Mr Cheney struck back at the House committee in mid July, accusing members of approving the most expensive approach to buying Navy aircraft and delaying plans to rebuild F-14's at half the cost of new planes. He has started what an aide called a major effort to win Senate backing; he has talked

with many members of the Armed Services panel. In addition he ordered the Pentagon's Congressional liaison program into action. "Mr. Cheney does not want to lose this one," noting that winning would be critical to his attempt to control budgets.

If he loses, Pentagon officials and industry executives said, Congress will assume that the situation will be business as usual. For years, members of Congress have shaped military budgets to suit political needs, mostly jobs in their districts, rather than to meet the security needs of the nation.

U.S. Navy

Pentagon acquisition chief Robert B. Costello said the Pentagon cancelled the Navy F-14D and Air Force F-15 production programs to force the services into committing to-- and succeeding at-- the next generation of combat aircraft. The Navy and Air Force "can be coerced" to honor their commitments to share the A-12 attack aircraft and Advanced Tactical Fighter (ATF) designs, "but they won't be if they have something else to fall back on," Costello said. Without a safety net, "They'll think, 'I've got to make this work.'"

Military services are carefully scrambling to protect their own bureaucratic interests at the expense of national interest. Senior Navy officers, who have repeatedly told

Congress that the F-14 should be kept in production until a replacement plane is ready in the mid-90's, have been silent in this dispute, because they fear angering Mr Cheney. Just after Secretary Cheney took office in February, he publicly criticized the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen Larry D. Welch, for briefing members of Congress. "That was a shot across everybody's bow," said a Navy officer.

Just days before retiring as the Navy's Chief of Air Warfare, Vice Admiral Robert F. Dunn states that the ability of the Navy to keep its plans to fully modernize the fixed-wing carrier force is grim. He warns that the Defense Department's proposal to cut procurement of 127 newly manufactured Grumman F-14D Tomcats will leave the service short of 56 Tomcats by the year 2000.

Vice Adm Dunn continued to say, "I am leaving now, so I can be kind of nasty," he chuckled. "The New York Congressional delegation comes to the defense of Grumman whenever Grumman gets in trouble, but when we need them in defense of aircraft carriers, or other Navy programs, they are silent," he says. He also has little patience with Grumman's offer to build a so-called Tomcat 21 as a follow on to the F-14D and a lower cost alternative to the naval variant of the planned ATF.

Grumman Corporation

Grumman Corporation's new Chairman, John O'Brien, is a tough, smart, hands on street fighter. Since April, he has spent one or two days a week in Washington, talking to senators, representatives and White House aides about restoring F-14D funding. He had a private meeting with White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, whom O'Brien described as "very knowledgeable" about naval air issues.

"He asked me to submit a white paper" on the F-14D and other Grumman planes, O'Brien said. He said he would take it to the proper channels in the White House as an issue.

From the beginning of the battle to save the F-14D, O'Brien's strategy was to talk about the value of the plane to Naval aviation and the Navy's mission. He would hammer away at whoever would listen. And he would add, again and again, that eliminating funds for new F-14Ds would effectively put Grumman out of the business of building Navy fighters, leaving only McDonald Douglas Corporation of St Louis. O'Brien acknowledges his battle to save the F-14D has not won him friends in the upper echelons of the Pentagon.

"I believe that we are antagonizing the office of the secretary of defense," he said. "That's a risk, and it's certainly something I didn't set out to do ... On the other hand, the secretary of defense did not sit down with the

chairman of this corporation or listen to any of these arguments before he went to Congress with a budget."

So far analysts and congressional staff members say, the strategy has worked. Grumman keeps its warm production line, its efficient production line, through 1991 or 1992. And that puts the corporation in a much better position to make a realistic bid for the Tomcat 21.

The Long Island Congressional Delegation

After this April's announcement to cancel future F-14D procurement, all five Long Island Congressmen personally appealed to Defense Secretary Cheney to restore funding, saying its cancellation would damage national security and cost the country a major military airplane manufacturer.

"He did not relent," Representative Norman Lent (R-East Rockaway) said after the 40 minute meeting with Cheney at the Pentagon. "But he understood that we would take this fight to the floor of the Congress. He indicated that if that was the case, he could live with whatever the Congress would do. But he said he would fight for his position."

The meeting with Secretary Cheney is only one step the delegation is taking in an effort to save the F-14, said Representative Robert Mrazek (D-Centerport). Each Wednesday morning Long Island's five Congressional Representatives meet

behind closed doors to map strategy in the campaign to save the Grumman Corporation's F-14 Tomcat fighter.

Mrazek said the strategy is to first persuade chairmen of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees to restore the funding. Generally, if money isn't authorized by the armed services panels, it is difficult to get it added later by the Appropriations Committees.

The delegation is trying to broaden support in Congress for the F-14. Downey is to work on Representative Les Aspin (D-Wis), Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, whom Downey backed when the veteran Democrat was in danger of losing his committee chairmanship. The two are considered close.

Lent is to work with the White House and Pentagon. Mrazek, a member of the Appropriations Committee, is to lobby members of that panel and Hochbrueckner has the same assignment with the armed services members. Mr Hochbrueckner, just beginning his second term in Congress, does not have much seniority. But he is a former Grumman engineer, "so I can make the technical arguments," he said.

McGrath, a member of the influential Ways and Means Committee, is to seek the support of members there.

Senator Alfonse D'Amato, a Republican, and Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, a Democrat, are to lobby Sam Nunn (D-Ga), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and key Senate appropriations members.

On Long Island, the effort by political and business leaders to save the F-14 has generally consisted of issuing statements of outrage against the Bush administration's decision.

Nassau Republican Chairman Joseph Mondello said killing the plane would be "a slap in the face" to Long Islanders "who supported Mr Bush when he ran for election last November."

"This is the plane that was used against the Libyans in the Gulf of Sidra," said Representative Lent. "It forced down the plane with the Achille Lauro hijacker. It's the plane that protects our aircraft carriers. Everybody knows this plane. It's the plane Tom Cruise flew in 'Top Gun.'"

Long Island members of the House are concerned that the reverberations of loosing the F-14D could shake not only the economy of Suffolk and Nassau Counties, where business leaders say 15,000 jobs are at risk, but also the foundations of American security. It could also alter the trajectory of the Long Island Congressmen's careers.

This is not the first time that the Long Island delegation has stormed the halls of Congress to protect defense spending in their area. "It's going to demand all my attention, all my political skills, all my operational ability and most of my chits," said Representative Downey, Democrat of Amityville. "No effort will be spared." However, "The last thing you want

is to win a Pyrrhic victory where Cheney says, 'O.K., you beat me this year but I'll get you next year.'"

The Long Island Congressional Delegation tried to be tactful as well as persuasive, in the hope that the Secretary of Defense might view the reinsertion of the Tomcat into his budget as acceptable, provided Congress insisted upon it and the Pentagon received concessions in return.

Conclusion

Grumman's Congressional strategy focused on why the Navy needed the F-14D, Representative Lent said. "If you cry jobs on the floor of the House, you'll get laughed out of the joint," he said.

Representative Hochbrueckner says that the agreement to fund the plane this year, to be followed by termination (the poison pill), "does not close the door on future Grumman aircraft ... it may be a whole new ball game in 1991," he said.

The real issue "is" jobs; and the primary concern of our Congressmen will always be re-election. And this bureaucratic process never ends; and the fat lady never sings.